



### detnews SITE INDEX

Homepage  
Search  
CyberSurveys  
Horoscope  
Lottery  
Michigan's Best  
Weather  
Staff

### FORUMS

News Talk  
Autos Talk  
Big 10 Talk  
High Schools  
Lions Talk  
Pistons Talk  
Wings Talk  
Tech Talk  
Tiger Talk  
Weight-loss

### NEWS

Autos  
►Insider  
►Auto Show  
►Drive  
►Joyrides  
Business  
►Careers  
►Money & Life  
Census  
Columnists  
Commuting  
Detroit History  
Editorials  
Metro / State  
►Livingston  
►Macomb  
►Oakland  
►Wayne  
Nation / World  
Obituaries  
►Death Notices  
Politics / Govt.  
Real Estate  
Religion  
Schools  
Special Reports  
Technology

### SPORTS

Sports Insider  
►Lions/NFL  
►Red Wings/NHL

Thursday, March 11, 2004



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

The 24 vents, which bore 24 feet into the old landfill, stand 6 feet above the ground and are located 15 feet from residential property lines. The first of the vents and monitors were installed in September.

## Freedom Hill spews methane

New vents don't pacify neighbors

By Gene Schabath / The Detroit News

**STERLING HEIGHTS** — When Louis Elliott bought a house on Georgetown in 1972, one benefit was a stunning vista of woods, marshland and open spaces behind his back yard near Metropolitan Parkway and Utica Road.

What Elliott didn't know was that beneath the ecological beauty festered rotting garbage that would return three decades later to haunt residents living behind Freedom Hill County Park.

The presence of methane gas has become such a problem for neighbors that the state Department of Environmental Quality has installed 57 gas detection devices

► Latest Macomb

► Previous Story

► Next Story

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- Browse
- New & U
- Employr
- Homes c
- Shop Or

Home Del

- Start ho
- Renew s
- Custom

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Macomb

- Pistons/NBA
- Shock/WNBA
- Tigers/Baseball
- MSU
- U-M
- More Colleges
- Golf Guide
- High Schools
- Motor Sports
- Outdoors
- More Sports
- Scoreboards

**ENTERTAINMENT**

- Entertainment
- Casino Guide
- Movie Finder
- Restaurants
- TV Listings
- Crossword

**GREAT LAKES ESCAPES**

- Home
- Destinations
- Hunt & Fish
- On the Water
- Recreation

**HOMESTYLE**

- Homestyle home
- Decorating
- Eats & Drinks
- Recipe Box
- Gardening
- Health
- Home Improvement
- Home Life
- Home Tech
- Wine Report

**PHOTOS**

- Photo of the Day
- Sports
- Red Wings
- Lions
- Autos
- Auto Shows
- Joyrides
- News
- History

and vents to safely get the gas out of the decaying garbage. The worry is that this type of gas can cause an explosion and hurt people.

The problem has struck elsewhere in Metro Detroit. In April 2000, rotting garbage at the Six Star landfill in Rochester Hills created methane gas that seeped from the site and into the basements of at least six homes. A spark ignited a fire in one home; two people inside the home escaped, but lost their dog and belongings.

Detectors have been handed out to dozens of residents to make sure the gas doesn't enter their homes and get ignited by a pilot light, cigarette lighter or lit match.

Since September, methane gas has been detected by monitoring devices as far away as the front lawns on at least one of the homes on Rivercrest, Barrows said. No detectable levels of methane have been found in any homes.

DEQ workers this week began excavating a 1,400-foot-long, 6-foot-deep trench to help siphon the gas from the landfills, which are covered by 6 feet of dirt and clay and haven't been used since the 1960s, said Greg Barrows, senior geologist with the state agency.

The 24 vents, which bore 24 feet into the old landfill, stand 6 feet above the ground, about 15 feet from people's homes. Three more vents have been installed behind the American House senior citizen complex on Metropolitan Parkway because methane gas was detected this week near the property. The vents and the new trench will keep gas from seeping through the ground, into homes, Barrows said.

The vent pipes are perforated. Gas is sucked into the pipes by circular fans. The gas is then harmlessly dissipated into the air before it can reach the homes, Barrows said.

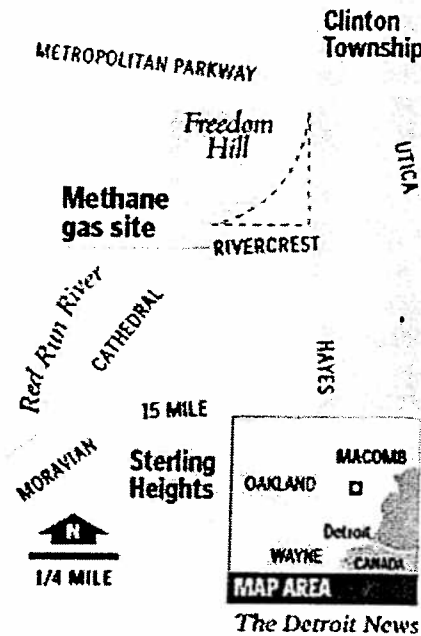
Four-inch-wide perforated plastic pipe will be installed in the trench. Gas will go into the pipe and before it will be sucked up into the vents and discharged into the air, Barrows said.

Elliott said the methane gas problem and noise from Freedom Hill concerts are the last straw for him. He is putting his house up for sale.

State officials discovered the problem in Sterling Heights last year when Environmental Quality began checking old landfills after several methane explosions had occurred in homes statewide near old garbage dumps, Barrows said.

"We felt the urgency. This needed immediate attention," Barrows said.

The first of the vents and monitors were put in Sterling Heights in September.



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- Macomb for Thursday 2004
- Warren dispute
- Freedom methane
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- Macomb
- Macomb Education
- Romeo appeal
- Chester out to kids
- Macomb news
- Incumbent village vote
- Macomb elections
- Drivers Mile
- Shelby pay raises
- Family s in Sterling I
- Macomb Briefs
- Macomb
- Rec cen way

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Select inc

Copy  
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Use of this  
agreement  
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The long-term solution to the methane gas problem is the complete decay of the tons of garbage in the landfills, but that could take 40 years, Barrows said.

In one last cruel twist of fate, Elliott said he just received his new tax bill and the assessed valuation of his property was raised \$12,000.

"How can they do that when we have all the potential for (property) depreciation?" Elliott said.

Sterling Heights Assessor Matt Schmidt said the value of Elliott's home and other property in the subdivision was determined by a two-year sales study that was completed in March 2003. That was before the methane gas problem was discovered, Schmidt said.

The city's zoning board will have a special hearing March 17 for residents of the subdivision to appeal their new assessments.

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Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

**The vents and the new trench at Freedom Hill are designed to keep methane gas from seeping through the ground into or other structures.**

► [Previous Story](#)    ► [Next Story](#)

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